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**This Vault of Bone  
and  
The Lyrical Spine**

**Jill Eulalie Dalbard**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montréal, Québec, Canada**

**August 1988**

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## ABSTRACT

### "This Vault of Bone" and "The Lyrical Spine"

Jill Eulalie Dallbard

My thesis consists of "This Vault of Bone", a long poem, and "The Lyrical Spine", thirteen independent, short poems.

"This Vault of Bone" is set in the Canadian Arctic, the last remaining Canadian wilderness. The poem treats of the explorations of a central persona in her search, both geographical and psychological, for her place in life. In a series of external and internal journeys, she rejects the land from which she has come. She gradually establishes a bond with the white wolves, animals in harmony with the land and their own societal structures. The poem ends with her choice to remain in the north, having achieved a new sense of balance and independence. The poem assumes the form of a journal, with the fragmentariness and variety and ambivalence the form entails. Nevertheless, the sequence is held together by both narrative fragments and thematic threads.

The shorter poems may be grouped by theme and techniques employed: the five ghazals point to extreme economy of form on both an imagistic and psychological level; the same is true of "Day Songs". The two poems "Patterns" and "Mother" are more discursive in style and explore the mother-daughter relationship. A different relationship, that between man and woman, is dealt with in "Bowman Lake" and "Cleopatra to her Asp".

impending death and the passage of time is the central theme of "Then", and "Soundings". Finally, "My Evening Elk" explores briefly and in a more lyrical manner a moment of interface between man and animal—moment which draws us again towards the periphery of the wilderness.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I	THIS VAULT OF BONE	
	This Vault of Bone . . . . .	1
II	THE LYRICAL SPINE	
	Then . . . . .	76
	Cleopatra to her Asp . . . . .	78
	Bowman Lake, Twenty Years After . . . . .	79
	Ghazal Song . . . . .	81
	Window Story . . . . .	82
	Summer Ghazal . . . . .	83
	Chords . . . . .	84
	Birthday-morning Ghazal . . . . .	85
	Patterns . . . . .	86
	Mother . . . . .	87
	Soundings . . . . .	88
	Day Songs . . . . .	90
	My Evening Elk . . . . .	92

**THIS VAULT OF BONE**

January 2

One cabin, small  
to whit, one room  
with window.

So the list begins,  
the tally of objects  
inside,  
a stay  
against the hectares  
of white:  
a deep chair  
made of logs  
upholstered in bark

Table and upright chair  
near the stove,  
a slatted bed  
with purple down-filled  
bag, custom-made  
for the north



A box of dried salted meat, tea,  
three pots, one pan and  
other luxuries  
at bottom of bed.

No telephone jangle to gouge me  
from sockets of sleep.

No contracts, lawyers,  
would-be buyers.

Only the grunt of log as it nuzzles  
the killing heat of the stove,  
the scratch of the brush  
commanding paint-wash on paper.

And silence, leagues of frozen silence

A golden realm?

Panes groan.

Dusty boards creak under my feet,  
a soulful racket.

Kingdoms of splodge

viewed through a disfigured glass.

January 2, evening

I'm still a tidge shattered,

Vibrations of chopper

tease me, bounce

on a switchback

inside my ears.

Reverberations of champagne

(yesterday only?)

hang over

in my head.

I'm a soft touch

(remember?)

for an Aulde Lange Syne,

(to hang my new black

crepe in the cedar closet?)

I just couldn't miss that one.

Now for the true New Year,

the real, the actual.

Mid-winter, mid-life.

No half measures for me.

On top of the world

I'll contemplate, find

my life's path,

footprints in the snow.

Sister, mother take stock,  
I'm a real winner!  
I'll wipe you both  
off the board, seize your bets,  
see it through to the light.

No treading the therapy mill,  
ten years with a potbellied  
shrink, 'Please come in now,'  
twice a week.

I will come in  
to my own.

I'll decide my future  
balance myself  
here in six months  
of frozen spaces.

January 3

God, how the thick dark clusters  
into this placid

The land is a huge white body,  
black ribs protrude  
under the night.

Collapsed thorax  
awaits the thrust of breath-pump.

Darkness settles,  
pale stars whisper  
so I can't hear them.

My voice freezes  
to a rough  
cackle.

How long does night last?

January 8

Time out from time.

Snowshoe this one out.

Others keep whirling in the wind

I'll contemplate today, tomorrow,

the perfection of white dreams

in a dark cabin.

This climate will cool my brain

down to lucidity,

chisel these thoughts

to an icepick,

help me carve out

my next move.

8  
January 10

Which do I  
prefer? This  
harpoon, night  
or those days  
of migraine,  
that other country,  
Denver boot  
crushing my head?

Land of Manicure,  
dream-house photos  
gagged in plastic;  
greenhouse for shiny tomatoes, oranges  
strapped to styrofoam trays;  
trackland of deadlines,  
slow start, heavy  
loss, late  
finish.

Who needs either?

Perched at earth's end

In a windswept hut

I hatch plans

for a new destination in life.

Chopper can take me

at summer's end

or when I choose to go.

January 15

Night calls,  
audio-balt.

Hungry wind  
claws at the door,  
wants in.

Whiteness  
dangles a hook  
to pull me closer  
off course.  
Of course.



January 21

The whiteness

rears itself up

(rush to window,

paintbrush poised)

howls, whines.

Daub, splitch

freelove escapes,

gives me the rush.

My stomach growls

in answer.

January 30

Antidote for snow anemia:

drink one cupful of boiled

snow infused with

crimson-vermillion

Windsor and Newton.

Squeeze one tube,

draft it down,

A sanguine potion!

February 7

Goodbye, Perkins, goodbye. Circle each week,  
watch for the smoke  
from the tin-pipe chimney;  
collect me at summer's end.  
Land before that day  
at your peril!

Down-drifting to white  
an overweight Venus, wafted,  
out of her shell.  
Not even the whirl of chopper blades  
could spoil the descent  
blur the sight of that cabin,  
set like a precious stone in its clearing.  
I waddled, half-waded in darkness  
over the webbed snow to the door,  
dragged the bundles in  
to the small room.  
The droning shell ascended  
into the sky.

February 15, dawn

It would be dawn anywhere else,

Here it's perpetual night.

My exile,

my arctic cell,

strict as the closed folds

of a nun's habit.

February 22

Minus 55° Celsius.

Dirge from my constant companion  
the wind, her groan chorus.

Moments I miss:

the suave touch of martini  
savoured in sips  
from the depths  
of my green satin sofa;  
the perfect stab of my finger  
(armoured in fire-engine red)  
cutting discussion dead  
at the Museum Curator's Committee;  
the amorous click  
of two dice  
touching shoulders;  
a flirt in my low cut  
tangerine silk with  
whoever is worthy.

Images frozen  
into the icy air.

March 1, p.m.

Jobs to do:

empty the toilet  
saucepan, a thing  
of elegance and utility.

That chamber pot I saw  
at Ballingdon's auction  
would have done well.

Seymour pointed it out.

Pink roses, all painted by hand,  
and inside, on the floor,  
(so to speak)  
a soft pansy.

Build a wall of logs  
beside my bed,  
a room-divider.

Each log upright  
side by side  
sentinel soldiers.

Single-file  
from bed-head

to southwest corner.

Regimentation's

the name of the game.

A short wall

creates a room

with a view.

Dreamspace, womb-place

beneath roof of ribs.

March 10, evening

My excavations

under the bed

with antique broom

net one large spoon,

a shrivelled tome

called Pear's Family Cyclopedia,

1910 edition.

Dustballs, mouse

droppings, a scurvey

collection of artifacts.



Wednesday, March 13

One gets such serious thoughts

in the early morning.

The mind labours

under the weight of reparations.

A body that sleeps not, lives not.

Maintain the logic

at all costs, evade

the unthinkable equation

Sharpen the tools,

carve

a shape,

build a home

beyond the mass

of the frozen tundra.

The mind, a whirligig

of chopper-blades,

contemplates relocation.

March 20, three a.m.

How many

seconds

minutes

digits?

Check it out, count the cast.

Thousands of dusky arctic quartz hours

lottering, waiting for the sun,

a frozen orange

rolling along the horizon.

Six days to Perkins!

Stove must be starved,

no smoke rise,

then he will land.

Be done with gloom,

this retreat.

I'll beat a quick one.

March 20

Dark dawn in a cold room,

stove leaking

grey hairs of smoke.

My head pokes from the bag.

Pins and needles in left leg.

How tacky can you get?

Crunch, crunch,

the blessed door jammed.

Pad out on snow-paws,

shoes print wings

on ghostly real estate.

Where are the wolves?

I fumble binoculars.

Water blur, pigment blends,

splashes the eyeball -

a masterpiece in binary fusion.

Kettle-water sings

to a slice of frozen bread

sizzling on stove lid.

The wind whines under the door.

Breakfast aria.

March 21, morning

How did I stand it?

Those mornings of spittle

on the bathroom mirror

after you'd flossed your teeth.

Anyone else would

(and did)

wipe it off afterwards.

Even this snow-smudged window

is crisp and clean.

Canada post, where are you?

Take note of me. Am I

a striking proposition?

When I let the fire go out

Perkins will land, bring news,

rescue me. What have you

been up to in my absence,

Seymour?

A pair of jaws  
snapping up blankets,  
generator of small talk,  
the cold chatter.

You and your trivial pursuits.

Magpie you hoarded words

glittering, silver words,

swallowed them whole,

hook, line and syllable:

"cariole, a dog sled

often ornate, designed

to carry one person, lying down."

Pears, p. 310.

Do I really

want to be rescued?

March 21, evening

Four notches,

in vertical progression,

high on the wall

over the bed.

A giant child?

Shrinking man?

Winters survived.

Monosyllables

of illiterates

who learned to love

this land.

March 22

"Frostbite.

The propensity of skin  
exposed to extremes  
of low temperature  
to erupt, form scabious tissue,  
protective layer."

Pears, p. 1010.

What if I freeze  
for one night  
without heat of stove?  
Comfort opens her padded arms!

What if I don't win  
my wager? Losing  
will be luxurious.

Thursday, March 23

My blistered hands sing in ecstasy.

The wolves howl

in the woods.

All this is a far cry

from the call of perroquets

drifting along the Nile,

in the perfume of purple sails,

or that summer we crossed the Equator.

We ate mangoes on the deck at dawn,

threw the heavy

stones over the ship's side.

I remember our last outing

or was it my inning?

The Bateman vernissage.

That really daubed my spirits.

In the studio

a stare of wolves

aloof in white spruce,

lords of the land.



You belaboured  
the length of their legs  
and the use of brown  
in a shadow-wash!

Mango stones are porous,  
fibrous material, you said,  
float indefinitely.

Our case has already sunk.

March 24

When they work,

its pure magic.

Two blurred circles

suddenly merge to one.

The wolves leap onto my canvas.

Their song invades me.

Head down, rump up,

wag of tail,

pounce on the male.

Trip him, sprawl him,

run him in circles,

tumble together

in the soft snow.

Small ones observe,

panting lips

drawn back over incisors

in a pink smile.

Hallo Uncle

returned from a trek?

Skid to a nose-stop,

amid knot of tails

in a wag, in a sniff.

Then stand tall and still,

Mother will reach up

and lick your face.

Play at night

In the pale moonlight.

Uncles, mothers,

nephews, brothers,

head, rump

moss, romp

In the snow of the beautiful land.

None but the convert

enters our band.

March 25

My arctic retreat  
Is a trifle more difficult  
than I had imagined.  
A frozen dessert  
that's hard to swallow.  
I'll have to stomach it.  
My quest is not yet done.

Has it begun?

A small  
familiar bet  
preys on my mind.  
Sisterly Ida crouches  
behind an iceberg.  
Six months  
or my condo?

One day to Perkins.  
It's my move now!  
At midnight the sun  
bounces off the horizon.

March 25 eve

Wind freezes the window with ice patterns.

I'm ready for memories:

arguments over the child,

the ghostly child.

Jaws snap. I remember.

My stomach hard with a ball of anger.

This evening is yours to haunt me.

Rise from carrion feathers

fill the room with that thick presence.

I pluck each particle

from my skin, from each strand of hair.

I wait for you

here in the silence.

My phoenix ignites.

March 26

Aha! the chopper.

I've kept the fire going  
and hope you see, Perkins.

I'm staying a week  
or so, more.

My morning task to feed the stove,  
short stumps and long.  
No mail service for me,  
at least not yet.

I stuff them in.

I feed the stove  
to keep me warm  
and busy;

It does not talk,  
It knows its place.

I remember the day

I first hired you,  
with your crateful of credentials.

I'm fed up with wooden furniture.

I'll let you land, Perkins.

Bring me a padded armchair  
embroidered with pink cotton peonies.

To Whom It May Concern

Mr. Perkins has worked for me for 16 years  
in capacity of Personal Assistant. He is  
devoted, earnest, and accurate, in triplicate.  
He also makes an excellent cup of tea.

Hurry on home.  
Keep the books in order,  
water the Norfolk pine  
on the condo roof.

✓



March 29

Will the sun ever learn to fly here?

I've stumbled kneedeep into an

oldie black and white

movie. Let's crank it up again.

Seymour, rerun it

In Vistacolour. How did

that scene go? I shrieked

'No' to the child, and fell in your

brown arms, we subsided

into a riot of purple peonies

(permapress on bed), your

blond head nuzzled my pink breast.

You swore you loved me, forever

we'd cruise up the Nile

under mauve sails

while parrots applauded

from orange boughs.

We sailed into the

red sunset.

March 30, Wednesday

Awake to warm room.

Shuffles of wind at window corners.

Stove, mug,

the depths of chair.

Then glide to the door.

See a shape deep in the snow.

Does it rise to greet you?

Is it wolf or bear

keen for company?

Feet secure

in their bindings,

cold fingers

fumble spike

through pin-hole.

One giant step. Lunatic strides.

Duck footed, toes splayed

to the hulk of huge wall.

Narwhale, bones arched like a house

half buried in snow.

I see small craters

from bodies curled

in a feast of sleep.

A snatch of white ruff  
torn in a scuffle  
and out there  
plsshholes in the snow.

I enter the cage  
of bones arching, bending  
in supplication.

Heart-box, breath-pump.

Stumble down a crevasse of ribs.

April 10

The light is changing.

This morning the black velvet

is drawn back from the sky,

a glow filters through

the inner drapes,

the other stars fade.

Light is a luxury here.

Thursday mid-morning

There's the dark one  
alone, on her path to the woods,  
trotting away, not a word to the others,  
tail in the air like a banner of freedom,  
mouth half open.

She stops for a sniff at the new light,  
tries to touch,  
lifts her front paw,  
shakes it,  
and is off, running fast.

Partners in snowbound solitude!

April 20

They've turned the current  
back on. Halleluiah!

Fill lungs with light.

Bellow them out

In a crystal chorus.

Friday late afternoon

Loner returns

through the field of my glasses  
to the heat of the lair,  
the sprawl of uncles,  
stomachs, noses, sisters,  
bushels of back-sides.

Sentry's howl from the trees

pricks ears

halts tracks in the sun-streaked snow,

muzzles cocked in song:

come back, sister, return!

Bite your tail, lick my arse

fall down auntie, let me pass!

Pups join the chorus.

Leader bats a greeting to the air

loner fields the notes,

heads for home.

Huge head in an aura of light,

a smudge of wide lips

a smile, fangs bare,

shake in a bow.

I'm losing focus.



May 2, p.m.

Light blasts through window,

bounces off stove, hands

settles on table.

I spread it on toast,

devour it.

May 12

The cut knee heals,  
Narwhale owes no apology,  
I'll return soon  
to her arches  
where the wind chants  
its white communion.

Meanwhile I'm propped in bed  
against the new wall,  
in my duckdown bag.  
My stomach's on strike  
against dried food,  
left hand's rebellious  
towards dexterous can opener.  
A sinister plot.  
That's it Perkins,  
send a real duck  
down and  
a bottle of Chablis.

Roast one orange,  
paint the duck,  
stuff the stove.

May 24

Walk through vault of Narwhale  
whispering, calling.

Her third rib is broken,  
snow drifts through her roof,  
white pile, wind-brushed.

Her walls return my call  
but do not answer,  
her limbs enfold me in a biblic space  
and I offer a small grace  
to the rib that is close to her heart.

Two shapes stand  
shoulder to shoulder, tails waving.  
He nips her hind legs,  
each leaps over the other and off,  
whirling snow from pads.  
Sudden she stops to face  
him, bow to the left he to the right,  
then side by white side

scenting each other under a flurry of tails.

Quiescent she turns under

the arch of his mounting.

Two bodies heating the land.

I huddle alone

In my vault of bone.

May 24 evening. In my 'bedroom'

It's not duck à l'orange  
that haunts me now, Seymour.  
It's the orange you peeled  
in bed after our love-making.  
You pulled the skin down  
gently, undressed the curves  
of soft body, stripping them bare.  
Your hand touched my thigh,  
we turned over -  
curled into  
each other again.

There are parts of you  
I'll always miss.

May 25, early morning

"Harmonics of notes:

the method by which wolves

know the voice of their own.

The mellow "C" of a Steinmetz in an urban dwelling

is different from the "C" raised by a lone wolf

to her family far away.

Observe how the white heads

lift, jaws open.

Hear the tone, tossed by the pack

to a loner, away from home."

Pears, p. 400

Prowl of words on a page!

Acres of print to pursue,

I track down this item.

The land is certainly

taking me

by the scruff.

May 26

My body's beginning to pack it in.

Left ankle hurts, the varicose vein  
on my right calf is swollen.

Scars of encounters with Narwhale.

But my ears are good.

I can hear the night song of the wolves.

---

Howl the message out  
on the frozen air.

Head down, ears up  
this way, that,  
flick, flack.

Toss the notes up  
into the brightening sky,  
throw minims of light  
In joy, here is the sun,  
the sun, the sun!

The song goes out,  
the song returns;  
strand by strand  
past sentinel bristles.  
Sister, sister,  
welcome home.

---



May 30

My howl, a red  
wound in the sky,  
shrinks arctic boneyards.

Silence. One hand claps a jig,  
cajoles a sail  
from the frozen pack  
of ocean.

May 31

Sunlit I walk on white  
sand; huge finger of light  
points my path  
to the house of Narwhale.  
Her arched hulk shines.  
How close her kingdom,  
a hundred fathoms, how far

---

the few steps to her door  
I cannot tell. She shimmers  
black in the new light.

And then I am under her lintel,  
I lean against beams, her  
open door. Sun pours  
through her ribs, louvres  
of a deserted room.

From the rug of her hall I scoop  
snow, squeeze in bare hands,  
shape it, drop it to her floor.  
Again. The extasy of cold.  
I am the sculptor.

Gaze. Hundreds and thousands,

flakes under the bright light,

each one separate:

stars, small leaves

maple and oak, the pale,

the pure, devoid of gaudy.

Sift and they change

kaleidoscopic, words on a page.

Mine is the motion.

Breathe. Angular shapes

melt, flow each

into the other.

Mine is the inspiration.

At the doorway

of Narwhale I stand,

ready to enter.

June 1

Hot grog by the fire.

Spine wedged to slats of chair.

The ribs of my log house arch, glow.

Warm within this golden whale

I curl.

Old curved bones pushing up

---

through the deep snow,

a special shelter;

under the arches

of this cathedral,

Inside the ribs of Narwhale

my small thoughts rattle.

Cradle of ribs which once rocked sea,

cove of ferment.

My cry rises unanswered.

June 3

Awaking to soft down  
floating my bones on a bed of elder,  
flowing downstream under the silver plumes of light  
curling out of the stove.

---

I glide to the door, float onto the snow.  
The wolves are romping, huge boas waving,  
feathers of breath ruffle the crisp air.  
Then overhead a grey drone,  
whirl of the chopper in careful surveillance.  
O give me white owl for my flight  
if ever I return!

There's smoke winding up the stove pipe.  
I have water in the kettle,  
dried food in the box.  
Go away,  
leave me in peace from your whirling!

June 4

The game is over.  
I've tossed the dice  
into a snowdrift,  
burnt the board  
in the stove.

---

The rules are gone.  
How can I  
make my move  
alone, without instruction?  
Who will teach me  
how to proceed,  
show me  
my place?

It's all a matter of re-creation.

Wednesday eve, June 5

Falling to sleep in Narwhale

clutching at ribs of night

on a hag-mare ride

over the petrified sea;

I cling to her bone-breaking sides,

we hurtle down to a green isle,

The Land of Manicure.

I have known this land, planted with neat streets.

Lawns cut and set with care, laid out to dry

near the waterfall which practices feats;

a junior gymkhana to please the eye.

The river in harness between strict banks

trots to a landscaped fall, jumps quietly down.

The chopper rests on my condo' roof, flanks

ready to rise, to snatch me back to town.

Next door, you admire your face in the glass,

squeeze at a blackhead, spill pink shaving cream

on the tiled floor, never mind, let it pass,

you will not wipe up. The woman will clean.

This is a land I have known,

land that I will not own.

Outstretched on broad back of white  
owl gliding, snow-shouldering wind,  
I doze to the beat of her wings,  
the tilt of her tack.  
She scoops the big gust tight  
in furls of feathers,  
holding a straight course back.

---

Slow claws  
hook the hard ice.

I wake alone in a dark den  
lined with white fur.  
Give thanks to the white ship  
Nanquahijaq,  
she who is ever upright,  
who billowed me back  
from the place of prisons  
through the dark night.



June 9

Outside my cabin door,

Imprints of huge paws.

Five marks to each.

Pads firm and fat

as parts of blackberry.

Dabs of yellow, spots of urine

on the step.

I daub, they squirt.

Is this a sign?

Is somebody trying

to tell me something?

White gestures stretch,

far off, a lone call.

Leader shakes a thick ruff, lifts her huge head

pushes her ears back to sing a comfort

up the muzzled wind.

I try to howl.

The land returns my call.

They do not answer.

A hundred yellow eyes stare at me.

Scurry of paws, a golden flurry

the pack is gone.

June 10

inside Narwhale  
sheltered, warm  
on a broad ledge of rib  
I curl. Lungs fill,  
ribs expand.

Her vault remains still.

I stand on the ledge, hands  
raised to arches.

We share the hours of night  
at the heart of the storm,  
your secret places became my haven.

We are one.

Let my words  
breathe life into these silent spaces.

My breath is your breath,  
your spirit my salvation.

Flex of a muscle,  
thrust of blood-pump,  
suck of the breath-pipe.

The walls of her body around me reverberate.  
Her slow limbs stretch,  
she turns her blunt head seaward.

We plummet green fathoms.

Inside the womb of Narwhale

I glide through years

of gold and green.

Dream of a garden singing with birds

In a green shade.

June 11

Early one morning  
just as the sun is rising  
here at the gate I stand,  
longing to enter.

Birdsong sewn through the bushes  
threads leaves, gathers the edge of lawn  
to a small world,  
children romp and call,  
I rattle at the locked gate.  
They fly in the swing  
at the side of the sandpit.  
I kick at the fence.  
Tiles under the kitchen window  
catch the last bed-time toss  
of a hopscotch  
snug to the eighth square.

I used to win  
with scrunch and a rattle  
of a chain in my hand,  
I threw  
my catface pendant  
into the air.

I know the light still shines on rainy days  
In the hall of the house,  
knees in the bedroom  
still climb to tall windows  
after lights-out  
to watch the twilight birds dance on the lawn.

June 11, afternoon

What a travelogue

of disasters!

I can't stomach Manicure

or Seymour.

Even the arctic wolves

give me the cold shoulder.

A lock out.

Pack it in for today.

June 12, middle of night

Cradle of green for that shape  
cool among leaves,  
its breath eased my lungs  
as I woke on the lawn  
lulled by the rise and fall  
of the soft calling.

The song of my dove  
is gone, feathers  
eaten away, body fallen  
in parts of burden,  
liver, heart, lung,  
separate as things  
dropped to the dust  
at my feet,  
outside the locked gate  
of the garden.

June 15, Saturday

Days and nights are warm. The snow has gone.

Awaking to evening under the swaying  
green blanket of spruce

I lie deep in the forest  
watching the moving circle of white  
high on the hill.

Silent heads lift,  
gaze at the sky of the midnight sun.

I long to be one with them.

Alone. It is silence and thunder,  
my shout for an answering voice  
echoing over the remnants of arctic skull-yards.

Contemplate sun's lustre,  
curtain of gauze.

Spirals of stars  
rising in sprays  
falling, falling  
away.



Lights dim  
shadows flash,  
Nature puts on  
her son et lumière,  
chateaux in the sky.

Hear  
the central ray,  
flame from a blowpipe  
rocket upwards  
shooting the zenith,  
high as my hopes,  
hot as my longing  
to join, to enter  
the circle of white.

See  
how a band of light  
flows up each side of the lonely sun,  
drops flakes of gold  
enfolding the family of white  
sculpted from the soft snow.  
I long be one in their land.

Howl streaks from my heart  
to the arch of air,  
The land returns my call.  
Then answer as thunder  
rises from leader.

Approach and halt, stand and show,  
bow deep on the cold moss  
to the white shape,  
she who stands tall!  
Pray. Admit one.  
A thousand years,  
facing that great white wall which will not thaw.  
Alone, the black spot at the core of the storm,  
my heart into space thrown.

Tall body onto the white moss thaws  
head over paws melting towards me,  
wall of the circle dissolves  
in welcome to enter,  
shoulder to shoulder we glide,  
fur against white side,  
in the land of the midnight sun  
where the search for the track ends.  
The dream and the life are one.

I am star shooting

in gown of gold

at the dawn of my joy.

I am hymn of doves

chanting

on the day of my dowry.

June 16

Red discus thrown to the sky

No lazy-slumbering now!

Yellow-head poppies shoot

half clothed from beds,

barely awake.

White bells ring

calling the world to race melt-water

leaping down hills, a cold dash,

In the drinking, sunning, seeding

light-long days of short summer.

The land awakes with a snort.

Fat bombus bees fumble on doorsill,

mumble an invitation

to enter the purple parlour,

quick now, here now,

sit there,

go now,

over the tundra.

Tussocks looped by loons calling

over the high grass

standing tall to ambush  
all comers,  
grasses vying for place,  
splashing the eyeball.

And far over the spongy meadows  
the dark loons cry.

June 16

I rise from sleep to summer smells,  
I romp with the wolves,  
waggle through tundra  
yellow with pollen,  
wiggle on soil  
close to the grass  
of the beautiful land.  
Nunassiaq,  
none other like her.

They float in the drift of the stream  
flowing, limbs melting away,  
to a shadowy, prowl in quiet time,  
to a quick pounce on moist flesh  
in that cool part of the day.  
Then curl, wound up  
to a tight ball  
in a deep den.  
Sleep unwinds the dreamless Now.

June -20

I sit on the hill  
watching the river  
count the height of the tide.

I wolf-trot with cubs in the tall grass,  
curl with the wolves under the cool shade.  
I hope for the gift of flowing.

How short is a summer?  
My heart is a clock ticking,  
marking time for a chopper return  
to execute my departure.  
My eyes scan the tundra, the sky,  
my hand catches the fall of a small lupin,  
All summer falls in the drift  
of a blue flower.

June 31

I hear the rush of propellers

I race to the den.

Above the empty cabin the engine buzzes,

huge bee over a dead flower.

It circles and calls.

Sleek bodies curl closer,

limbs over nose around head,

in delicious sleep.

We do not hear.

We need not answer.



## THE LYRICAL SPINE

Then

It was always the meadow.

At morning it lay a knee's hitch  
up to the tall sill  
of my bedroom window;  
then a gaze down.

It was crossed by a pale  
curve of blue river,

where the cygnet with only one web  
paddled beside  
his two brothers,

and the tail of my dog  
bounced dew  
onto the red tiles  
of the kitchen.

Then the hot summer  
days when the river slept as we wandered

between brown cows which grazed  
on green grass  
among cakes of dung;  
the sweet fumes of steam  
rose from moist pudding.

So that now, when I visit  
it is always the meadow.  
I stride in the crisp  
dusk, where balloons of breath  
rise from the mouths of cows  
cropping on yellow stubble.  
And my leaping dog is gone.

Cleopatra to her Asp

I remember the old man  
that day he came to seize our temples.  
Soldiers razed  
the porticoes.  
He shouted for silence.  
Night was a forced march  
over my body.

This other, the younger,  
I held at ransom,  
prisoner to my night strategies.  
He paid the price.

Who comes now  
to storm the river in purple sails  
will find only a body  
sleeping,  
will see in your kiss  
I yield to your decree.

Bowman Lake, Twenty Years Later

For Jacques

Hibernate the shutters

at blue of noon.

Dip swallows' wings

In shallow thoughts.

Fog strokes

the smooth face of the lake,

slides in

to the house,

eases the wheeze of a warped

record. Its lined body undulates

under the touch of a tired needle.

Only at dawn

lift the shutters,

hear the loons' dark cry

over the silent waters.

I remember

the thrust of your strong  
tongue in my mouth.

Fog descends again,

a grey disc of rain.

Put another record on.

That old, sad song.

My Funny Valentine.

The needle drills a dusty groove,

tears bleeding cavity

open. Pain

engraved on my mind.

Ghazal Song

For Fran and Don

Falling adrift to sleep of feathers  
gliding snowfall of down.

I float in the yellow lake. Starfish.  
Shadow sleeps on the blue bed.

Moon-silver crosses my window,  
the silver blink of eye.

Stretch of a cat-curl yawns,  
ribs open.

Sun straddles the mountain  
dressed in mist. Clouds ascend the mast.

Pink foot hits floor,  
black paws bounce.

Turn of a knob on the door. Frame open.  
Cobwebs gleam green in the golden garden,

asparagus hair. Cat purr gone,  
leapt to the sun. Welcome, morning.

Window Story

Cat-curl nests on a blue sill  
smooth as the egg of the robin.

Through ruffles of curtain  
green smell of grass.

Sun dozes. Purr hatches under warm hand.

Dog day glides.

Black sill, silent and bare. No warm  
vibration of ribs.

Dead leaves rain on the glass.

Cold pane.



Summer Ghazal

I gull-glide the blue sky,  
fish-dive the yellow lake.

Grey ribs of rocks. A curving.  
Light rises from bright waters.

Perpetual shoals of quicksilver.  
Cool flames dance on a grey face.

Starfish-hover, a hundred fathoms high.  
Shoot the sun.

I swim a thousand speckled feet  
deep on the wings of a trout.

Heave anchor up. White sail billows.  
Swallow loops goodbye.

Blue feather drifts,  
yellow gills close.

Chords

Dawn in the tall garden.

A single bird sings.

Clear note plucked from crystal.

I remember the touch of your hand on the nape of my neck.

Mating-call at dawn.

I mount the steps to your room.

Eager my climbing note, door silent  
and chained. Adamant.

Birthday-morning Ghazal

Butterfly-eyelids. Wink of window-blind.

The garden awakes.

Raccoon ambles the striped mist.

Asparagus arms stretch.

Dew-drag of fur-tail through long grass,  
spells a message.

Green hands tangle in breeze,  
waft a greeting.

Plop of a pine-cone on the moss floor.  
My mind reverberates.

A thin bird sharpens her note  
on the silent air. The day sings my year.

Patterns

for Nalo

The closeness of mother and daughter  
says Freda  
as we descend green heights  
to the red brick station,  
is special, unique.  
We climb under the shoulder  
dressed in mist.

The train pulls out  
with a grunt  
back to the grey town.  
Spindle of thread unwinds,  
tacks sheep to hem of grass,  
lines the tracks.  
My sides are stitched up,  
breathless. Applique of lambs  
sewn onto soft nipples.  
Her unseen hand.

Mother

Are tea-roses still warm in your garden?

Here it is only the white flakes  
falling into the hole of the dusk.

At noon I imagined your body  
tailored into the satin of Aunt Joan's sofa  
for a chat after supper.

I phoned, felt your absence  
cold as iced rain  
pierce the eye of the day.

Summer retracts, the slow reel  
of a film cranked back.

Are you in bed now, sleeping?  
I picture your curly chestnut wig  
on its post at the side of the vanity.  
Your grey head floats  
from the warm body of duvet  
like smoke  
from a snuffed candle.

Soundings

I live with an old cat. She is failing.

At daybreak she gropes the dark  
skeleton of her cupboard  
under the sink  
up to 'piping of starlings',  
songs on the roof,  
she smells her way.

I part the curtains, the sun whoozes in.

To her bowl she wheezes  
her sides, heaves a bit,  
her jaws mangle.

I pull up the window, open my lungs,

She mumbles her food,  
crawls to a patch of sun  
stitched on the floor  
of the living room.

I am living with an old body which is dying.

The ribs creak a bit, crack as the lungs  
swallow big breaths  
to push the heavy blood-pump down.

I will not take her to the knacker  
for vivisection on Tuesdays.

We will curl together into this lap:  
the tapestry of her ribs  
will weave itself between my ribs,  
which began to creak a little,  
to rise and fall in a slightly irregular wheeze,  
while stitches of sun  
tacked on the floor of the livingroom  
break their seam.

Day SongsI) Morning

Stars prick  
the top of my head,  
stumble-eyed I fumble  
the path to the garage  
door, guzzle the warm  
song of starlings,  
pull up my lungs,  
open the day.

II) Noon

Snap of green  
peppers, a fondle of lettuce,  
crunch of cucumber  
tossed into the bowl  
of a luncheon discussion.  
A cool bottle of Chablis breathes.



iii) Evening

A poke of black roses  
in the hole of the day,  
as I saunter the path  
from garage to heath-home;  
round eyes  
stare from the bush of the dusk,  
scamper back into my mind.  
I try to touch.

iv) Night

Blue fleece of sleep  
mantles my dream.  
Lambs in a flock  
bend bony knees,  
turn their hard hooves  
under; on their mattress  
of wool I slumber.

My Evening Elkfor Maria

Grey antlers  
shift gently  
between shadows  
of branches,

Do what, dare I  
reach out and touch  
his patent-leather nose  
his trunk of indifference  
as he stands  
still staring  
me down?